

Reinventing Staff Meetings

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When is the last time you heard anyone in your association say, “Oh boy, it’s time for staff meeting!” In fact, most people hate staff meetings, but for some reason we treat it like going to the dentist: we hate being there, but we know we’re better off in the long term by going.

While there may not be an easy way out of the dentist’s chair, staff meetings need not be so painful. It is true that staff meetings serve a purpose in the long term. We need to be aware of what others in the organization are doing, and we need to know how what we are doing connects to the organization’s strategy.

But the long-term value should not provide an excuse for ineffective and boring meetings in the short term. In fact, with the pressures on association staff to do more with less, we really cannot afford to spend as many as two hours per week wasting time. We need new solutions that allow staff to communicate and act strategically, without boring them to tears.

Consultant Patrick Lencioni offers an alternative to the boring staff meeting, but it demands a very different approach to meetings. His book, *Death by Meeting: A Leadership Fable About Solving the Most Painful Problem in Business*, suggests two reasons why meetings bore us so much.

First, they lack drama and conflict. While some may feel drama will make it worse, Lencioni makes a compelling case why organizations that avoid conflict actually make it harder to get things done. When staff can easily and (more importantly) quickly work their way through the inevitable conflicts, they get more focused on the things that need to be done. If employees skirt issues at the staff meetings in order to avoid conflict, those important issues end up in the hallways, at the water cooler, and behind closed doors, where it might feel safer, but ultimately it takes much more time to reach a conclusion and move to action.

The second reason Lencioni cites for boring meetings is their perennial lack of “contextual structure.” That is, meetings (particularly staff meetings) tend to wrap different types of discussion into one meeting structure. In a single meeting, the staff will be discussing what kind of potato salad to bring to the annual picnic, whether or not to change the dues structure, and the possibility of merging with another association. Agenda items tend to be covered in the order they were written down, so some important conversations get very little time, while other more tactical issues end up involving multiple layers of management unnecessarily.

Lencioni’s solution to this dilemma, believe it or not, is more meetings! In his book, Lencioni describes a suite of four types of meetings that match different structures to different purposes. For a senior management team, for instance, he suggests daily ten-minute meetings in the morning where each executive simply recounts what is going on for them that day (in the end, this reduces the need for boring updates at the weekly staff meetings—people already have a sense of what different people or departments are doing). Initially he suggests these brief meetings actually be conducted standing up (good incentive to keep the meeting to less than ten minutes). Again, the purpose of these meetings is only the basic information exchange.

Weekly staff meetings are transformed into more focused, tactical exchanges. Certain critical metrics are reviewed at each meeting, but the agenda for the meeting is actually developed in the room, based on information that everyone brings to the table during a “lightening round” where they share immediately important tactical issues.

Strategic issues are intentionally kept out of the weekly meetings, because they are handled monthly at scheduled strategy meetings. Strategy meetings provide adequate advance notice, so staff can do the homework, analyze the numbers, etc. The conversation at the resulting strategy meeting, therefore, is rich and focused, and you are able to work through to actionable conclusions (assuming, of course, you can work through any conflict).

The fourth type of meeting in Lencioni’s system is a quarterly off-site for the senior management team (a full day or longer) to deal with larger picture strategy issues or manage team dynamics.

Although the “more meetings” component can seem counterintuitive, the system can be applied successfully, even in the context of a small membership-based organization. Colleen Eubanks, CAE, Executive Director of the Christ Child Society, Washington D.C., has implemented a hybrid of Lencioni’s system as part of her efforts to increase staff communication and effectiveness.

In addition to bringing in a consultant to help her team develop conflict management skills, Eubanks developed a sequence of meetings for the office staff that alternated between tactical and strategic meetings—one every other week. With a small, interdependent office, she opted not to implement daily check ins. The strategic meetings, Eubanks contends, have been incredibly valuable.

For example, at one strategic meeting, the staff explored in depth how they could best develop their relationship with the Board of Directors. They ended up designing and implementing small but important changes in the way all the staff (not just the Executive Director) interacted with both the Board and Executive Committee. Eubanks could see the value of the strengthened board-staff relationships during their subsequent strategic planning process.

The new meeting structure has also brought some unexpected benefits. “I hadn’t anticipated it, but it has turned out to be a valuable professional development opportunity for my staff,” Eubanks explained. The strategic meetings are intentionally designed and facilitated by the staff—not the Executive Director. With a month in between each strategic meeting, the staff put considerable effort into planning and facilitating the strategic meetings. “It’s not like I am sending them to some generic course—they are actually applying what they are doing and learning to what the organization is trying to accomplish.”

Instead of viewing your staff meetings as a “necessary evil,” imagine what it would be like to be able to view them as professional development opportunities? It requires an intentional move beyond the conventional wisdom about staff meetings, but the effort required to make the change can payoff in terms of organizational results.